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ABSTRACT

In a basic-level writing course at the University of Minnesota, students were asked to read and engage in intelligent conservation about Keith Gilyard's "Voices of the Self." The book is about education but alternates autobiographical material with scholarly analysis. Literacy researchers expect students to read a text, understand what it has to say, and use it in some way (in writing or speaking) that demonstrates their understanding as part of the conversation of their classes. Many students, however, are not familiar with academic culture and ideology; they do not know what constitutes a literate reading; and they do not have the confidence to read texts that would be considered standard in the academy. Writing instructors may want to help students overcome these limitations but they also want to make the experience of academic discourse human and meaningful. Students need to make sense of their reading in light of their own experience and lives. Frequent and informal writing assignments handled over electronic mail can help attain these objectives since the instructor has a chance to respond personally to the development of each student, to encourage them to cultivate their own readings of a text. Excerpts from students' e-mail messages and essays shows their noteworthy development over the course of a semester. In the final weeks of the class, they communicated with Gilyard himself. Their understanding of literate conversation is shown by the critical nature of their questions. (TB)

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ED 399 535

To and Through the Academic Conversation

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4Cs - March, 1996

I want to begin this paper with a quote from a student named Jennifer Tran. It's from an email assignment in my course, part of which asked students to comment on their experiences reading Keith Gilyard's Voices of the Self, the main book I used in course I'm going to talk about in this paper. Jennifer wrote, "I often end up reading the book or chapter(s) over. My tension span for reading is not a long time." In a sense, this paper is about tension -- it's a reflective narrative about tension between my students and Voices; between what I needed to do and wanted to do with this book and students' writing in my class; and about the reading of the book produced by some students after spending seven weeks reading and writing extensively about this book and the ideas in it.

I teach basic writing at the University of Minnesota's General College. Our students are the ones who don't get into other, degree-granting units in the University, and our mission is to prepare them for transfer out of the college. Mike Rose used the phrase "entering the conversation" to describe what he, an underprepared college student felt qualified to do after spending four years in a liberal arts college; part of our charge is to prepare students to enter the same conversation. In the writing program, our courses are in part guided by collectively-authored directives written in response to research about what faculty in other units want to see in students' writing. One of the things they expect, of course, is for students to use reading in their writing in a fluid and conversant way -- in essence, to use reading to enter into a conversation about the subject of their classes.

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I've always worked on reading with my students. But when I decided to use Voices of the Self in one of my courses, I started thinking more seriously about it. This focus of this particular course is on education. Because of my approach to teaching and my research interests, I wanted to focus my course around the role of different discourses in education, and Voices provided me a way to do that. The book's even numbered chapters are autobiographical; much of the narrative concerns issues of race and language in Gilyard's education and center around the linguistic and cultural circumstances of Gilyard's life: In his home community, he spoke Black and Standard English; in his predominantly-white school, Gilyard spoke only Standard English and had students and teachers call him by his first name, Raymond. The odd numbered chapters are scholarly analysis and discussion based on issues raised in the narrative. Using this book as a core text, I hoped to help students understand the subject of our class, academic discourse, as another kind of language that brought with it a particular set of ideologies and values that might be different from their own; then, I wanted to help students negotiate ways to maintain their own discourses, values, and ideologies while still using academic discourse successfully. But in part because of the book's structure and language, I knew it would pose a significant challenge for students, many of whom had never read anything like it. Therefore, I wanted to think carefully about reading, about what I wanted students to get from the text through their reading, and about how I could best help them get it.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Reading

Reading and literacy researchers have noted that many college instructors assume students "know how to read." They expect students to read a text, understated what it has to say, and use it in some way (in writing or speaking) that demonstrates their understanding as part of the conversation in their classes. But

understanding and using a text in this way brings with it values and ideologies of the academic culture in which the understanding is cultivated, and in which it needs to be demonstrated. In essence, it requires students to demonstrate what I call public literacy, the ability to understand and use symbols (like language) in ways that reflect the dominant community's use of them.

But here's the first place where the tension between what I wanted to do and needed to do comes in. For instructors like me, only helping students understand and become publicly literate and enter the conversation poses several problems. On the one hand, I know that many of my students don't come from the dominant community and don't share many of its values. They're not publicly literate -- that's one of the reasons they're in General College. But rather than just help them become publicly literate, I want them to transform public literacy and change the conversation so it incorporates and reflects their values and ideologies. One the other, I know that students, particularly ones like ours, need to demonstrate public literacy in order to succeed in the educational system which has been all too willing to leave many of them behind. Students, too, want to develop this understanding and become publicly literate -- a colleague of mine repeats a story about one of his students who told him that he didn't want to learn to critique anything about the academy; he just wanted to learn what he needed to know to get a better job. This sentiment is shared by many of our students who, I think rightly, see education as the gateway to a better future. Further, the College's funding is partly dependent on the rate at which we successfully help students develop this kind of literacy and transfer out.

I thought about all of these things when I thought about reading in this course. What I wanted students to achieve through their reading, first, was confidence in their abilities to work with difficult reading. I wanted them to feel

like they could enter a conversation based on ideas and concepts that might not have been immediately familiar or even accessible to them. But I wanted to do more than just "pump them up," either by feeding them my analysis of Gilyard's book or inspiring them to carve out their own readings, entering into a conversation that might have no relationship to the one already taking place. Instead, I wanted to help them forge a publicly literate reading that recognized and incorporated the one "preferred" by the academy (in other words, me), and to help students understand why this was the preferred one; and to help them create their own readings of the text, taking into account similarities and differences (if there were any) between the two.

In this sense, my goals for the students who read Voices differed slightly from the goals articulated in a book like Bartholomae and Petrosky's Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts, which forms the basis for many basic writing courses (including, to some degree, our own). Where Bartholomae and Petrosky encouraged students to construct their own readings of the texts in their course, many of which were narratives, I wanted students to locate and position themselves around a preferred reading and to construct their own readings of a difficult text that would ask them to interpret both narrative and analysis and explore the relationship between them. I did this because I believe students will often be required to locate the preferred reading to be a part of the academic conversation, but I want them to be able to go through that conversation, too, to create a new one that incorporates their interests and values. This paper uses responses to electronic mail assignments as points from which to "watch" students read the book and see if and how they created this reading.

Reading Strategies

Before I begin discussing students' responses, I want to talk briefly about structures built in to this course designed to help students develop this kind of reading. First, I developed in-class and extended essay assignments for the quarter that asked students to draw on the text; to use ideas in the text to think about their own lives; and to analyze and, if they wanted to, challenge both the text and their lives through lenses provided by the book. Before students started reading, we had a discussion about reading academic texts. I distributed one-page handout on reading strategies and went through my copy of the book's brief introduction on overheads. I showed students how I located the reading's "structure" -- thesis, main points, "previews" of what was to come. I also showed them how I had a "conversation" with the book as I read, making marginal notes about ideas the text raised for me, and said these notes helped me to make my own interpretation of the book, something I hoped they would do, too.

I also provided students with 6-8 reading questions for each set of autobiographical-analytic chapters in the book that highlighted points that would be useful for their reading and writing. Some questions asked students to locate what I considered to be key moments or ideas in each chapter and to consider their significance; some to think broadly about the relationship between the narrative and analytic chapters in each set. I also asked students to be sure to write down words they didn't understand so that we could define them in class, and to write down what they found "boring" in the readings so that we could discuss why they found it boring and how to make parts like them less boring in future. On the days when reading was due, we spent the first part of the class (usually around 15-25 minutes) unpacking and defining difficult words and concepts. Then, for about 20-30 minutes, we discussed broader issues connected with the readings. In some classes, we'd do this on-line -- having a wide-open "what'd you make of it" discussion, or

one in which groups posted their responses to the reading questions and using these responses as a basis for discussion. For the remainder of class (no less than an hour) students had time to work on the writing they were doing in conjunction with the portion of the text we had just read.

Finally, I asked students to respond to very broad questions about the text and their experiences reading it in seven email assignments throughout the quarter. I encouraged students to use these assignments as spaces for less formal writing and thinking about the texts. In email assignments, I hoped that ideas might emerge that wouldn't in more formal writing; I would then help students work these ideas into their more formal essays.

Early responses: Locating the Conversation

Students' early responses to Voices pointed to an early and prominent tension in the course -- they weren't very confident in their abilities to read the text, much less read it critically. The same Jennifer who wrote the response that I used to open this paper, for example, was frustrated. She assessed her experience reading the book's introduction:

> What did I think about the book? It was hard to read and understand. His use of words were hard and you had to look up a lot of them. There was certain things that I did not understand. . . . He should have written in ways people reading it could understand it better. . . . the book is hard to understand because he doesn't tell exactly what happens. . . . What I want to know is how did they think of this standard English style. Why and how was this determined as the right way of speaking or writing style, language.

Jennifer's response was typical of many in the course. Although she says quite open about her frustration, she's trying to understand the book, albeit in a micro level, focusing on words that she doesn't understand. Of course, she's right in assuming that such words are important indicators of public literacy, so it's entirely logical for her to focus on them. In this sense, her response also shows that she's working to

understand the book. It also concludes with some great questions that demonstrate that, on some level, she is engaging with the narrative of the class and beginning to enter a conversation posed in the book. I responded to Jennifer's email by encouraging her to continue developing these kinds of questions as she read and reassuring her that she was, in fact, coping with this early portion of the book pretty well. Other students, like Jennifer, also expressed frustration after reading this section of the book, their responses also indicate that they're trying to read the book within the context of the class. While Jennifer and the other students hadn't yet arrived at a publicly literate reading that they could use to enter the conversation, they were working their way toward one.

The following week, after reading the next two chapters, I again sent an electronic mail assignment that, in part, asked students to write about their responses to the text. I provided students with the same kinds of reading questions I had the week before, and I assigned a short essay/long essay combination that asked, in part, for students to define Gilyard's position on the use of different dialects in school that he discusses in chapter five.

Responses to the reading submitted via email indicate a change in some students' perceptions of their reading abilities. First, however, it's important to note that some students still found this set of chapters difficult -- more so, in fact, than the previous set. For example, Jennifer wrote that the previous analytic chapter was "easier to read . . . because [it] talks about the different styles that is being used. Gilyard explains to you and shows you or gives you examples [of] the different dialogues. . . ." Despite her difficulties with this chapter, however, she summarizes what she thinks the main point of this part of the text is. "[In] chapter 5, he talks about the different transactional views. . . . In reading those different ways they explain things, some are hard to understand what they are trying to tell you." It's

important not to neglect a nugget like this. It shows that Jennifer is on the right track, that despite her lack of confidence, she's moving toward constructing a publicly literate reading that reflects the narrative I wove for the class. But I don't think that this would have come out in a formal essay -- it takes an informal writing space like email for something like this to emerge.

Other readers' responses demonstrated a sense of relief that this chapter was "easier" than the previous analytic one. Dave's response is a case in point. His previous response had deflected questions about the text with a "teacherly" analysis of the book's rhetorical style. This one, however, one focused on the analytic chapter's content. He wrote that

". . . chapter 5 was much easier to understand. Mostly because I had experienced getting over the hump. . . . For me instead of third grade it came in eleventh grade. When Gilyard says that by third grade students sometime find academic pursuit unfulfilling. That is what I felt like as a sophomore. . . . Although this is different then (sic) what Keith is explaining the similar situation helped me relate to the chapter. . . . The further I get into the book the more I am liking Gilyard's style and viewpoints." This response demonstrates that Dave is beginning to engage in a conversation with a real person, "Gilyard," and not just "the book." He's using a reading strategy I encouraged -- understanding analysis through personal experience -- to understand the reading. This is an important step toward achieving public literacy, because he is moving toward "equality" with the text.

The extended essays that some students wrote after reading this portion of the text also attest to their development as publicly literate readers. As I said earlier, part of the assignment asked students to define Gilyard's position on language and education and find evidence to support their definitions. In their essays, some students challenged the position that Gilyard implicitly took on this issue: although

he writes that pluralism (the idea that all dialects are equal and should have equal status) "is correct and the only [philosophy] in this day and age to which Black children are likely to subscribe" (74), they argued and found evidence in the book to support the argument that he was a bi-dialectist, someone who believes that "Black English is equal to Standard English but not quite equal enough." These essays highlighted a tension that students believed existed between the language and structure of the book and the argument in it, and marked an important step toward moving toward public literacy, entering a conversation with the text; and through public literacy, challenging that conversation and the text.

This essay was a turning point for many students with regard to their reading. After it, their responses demonstrate that they felt like confident readers who could not only participate in a conversation with the text, but challenge it, as well. Students like Michele were using the theoretical framework in the book to contextualize their reading of it. Her response is framed within one of the main ideas in the text, the "transactional" analysis that Gilyard says framed his interpretation of his life and experiences in the book.[1] She writes that "I know in this chapter that . . . Keith finally made a transaction one way or the other." Rather than simply use this phrase an affectation of academese, here Michele is framing her own analysis of the experiences in the text through the language used by the author.

But the biggest shift in a students' confidence with the reading came from Jennifer. Her previous posts had included good questions and restatements of the text, but also expressed frustration with the entire enterprise of reading it. In this response, she volunteered that she thought the book was getting "a lot easier to read;" explained why she thought so; and -- most significantly -- retells the book the

[1]According to Gilyard, such a model posits that "humans . . . are continually negotiating with an evolving environment . . . from this perspective, behavior is neither the exclusive acting out of inner drives, nor is it shaped solely by external forces" (13).

way that she understands it, discussing tensions in it within the narrative of the class. She wrote that

"The book I think makes you think more about the way you react to people and how you respond. He tells you the difficult struggles that he has to encounter through his school years. . . . It shows that he acts one way to his school friends and another way to his friends in his community. He does different things toward each different group that he is with. He wants to be more like his life in his community, but to be accepted in the school grounds he ends up acting a different way. He ends up ripping things off because he feels that, why should he be conservative while the "whites" are already doing that in the life he lives. He feels that racism is a big part of his life. I don't know if this is right, but he feels that he is not being accepted even though he has another identity. He still feels lost and he wants to become more of Keith, than Raymond, but he doesn't know how. I don't know if that is right, but if it is I would feel the same way. You want to be accepted, but then you also want to be you."

In this response, Jennifer has entered a conversation that involves a real person -- Keith/Raymond -- and has an interpretation of the situation surrounding this person. It also summarizes why she believed that Gilyard wrote the book, demonstrating that she was developing an understanding of his purpose and audience: "He is letting people know how he feels toward the language different and hopes that maybe his being educated will help support the facts that he is trying to prove. It is interesting to read about how other people feel toward things that I don't really ever give a second thought. . . " This kind of understanding is crucial for students as they move toward discerning what larger, academic conversation the text is a part of.

But the most persuasive indication that many students had become critical, engaged readers came near the end of the quarter as we planned for an electronic mail interview with Gilyard, who for the last two years has generously answered students' questions about the text and his life. The questions in these interviews came out of students' interpretations of the text, and show that they were confident enough in their reading to "enter [a] conversation" about reading and interpretation with an author and, in fact, to construct their own interpretation of the text. For example, students used Gilyard's argument in favor of linguistic pluralism as a starting point to ask questions about the language in the book:

- Why did you learn Standard English? Aren't you [really] a bidialectist? You wrote the book in Standard English so that you could sell it. Isn't that where languages are equal, but not entirely equal?
- Doesn't it contradict your whole book, writing it in Standard English?

They also asked about how he conducted his classes and where different dialects fit in them:

- Do you let students use their own dialect in your classes? If not, doesn't that completely contradict the point of the book?
- Do you use Black English when you teach?

and questions about the broader educational system (which Gilyard wrote about in chapter five of Voices):

- Have you found examples of educational systems or teachers who have used pluralism as a basis for their teaching, rather than eradicationism,? How successful were they, compared to [an eradicationist curriculum that Gilyard discusses in the book]?
- How could pluralism be implemented? What would it be? Considering that there are other dialects than Black English, how would the rest fit in?
- How would you go about implementing that into the system now?
- Do you think all education should adopt a pluralistic viewpoint?

Other issues came out of this interview, as well. Sometimes, students' interpretations of the text contradicted Keith's perception of the narrative and its

intentions. These questions were fairly pointed. One student asked why Keith "boost[ed] himself up so much in the beginning of the book," that he "looked conceited in the beginning, and . . . bombed in the end." Another multi-racial student who spoke two languages and several dialects of English said that "everything in this book was really good or really bad -- didn't anything normal ever happen to you? This all looks so good or bad. . . most people learn dialect from just sitting around the house." Regardless of how sharp these questions, however, they demonstrate that many students who, ten weeks before considered this text to be an insurmountable task, felt confident enough in their reading to enter into a conversation with the book's author, discussing tensions that they saw in the book -- in his interpretation of his life, and in the text's construction. Students who wrote that they had little confidence in their ability to deal with the language in the text, who said that they focused more of their attention on what they didn't understand than what they did, who seemed to spend a lot of time with a dictionary at their sides, were more than just using the language in the book for their questions -- they were asking questions through the theoretical framework of the book that focused on the theories and ideas raised there. In short, these students were doing what it is that we want students to do in any course -- they were acting as confident, engaged readers.

I won't take full credit for the process by which my students became these readers -- much of it has to do with them, not with me. But I think that when we think about reading, we should think carefully about what it is that we want our students to become through their reading, and implement measures in our courses to help them achieve it. This includes thinking about the kind of reading we assign, the ways in which we use this reading, and why we do it -- thinking about the importance of moving students to and through the academic conversation.